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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that a way of overcoming the conflict experienced by student teachers doing field work when their field-work teachers often have different philosophies than those taught on the college campus is to model a true learner-centered approach in teacher education courses. A stronger experience than using cooperative groups or having students pursuing activities in a teacher education courses is necessary for students to fully understand how a learner-centered classroom for preservice teachers can work. The paper describes classroom activities used over a 2-year period in a move toward an extreme position of learner-centeredness. The paper reports experiences with portfolios, cooperative-group assignments, task cards, and mini-lessons. Some of the changes that occur in teacher education students, and the students' responses to the course, are reported. Contains six references. (TM)

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JUMPING OFF THE EDGE: LEARNER CENTERED EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION

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Jumping Off the Edge:
Learner Centered Early Childhood Teacher Education

Learner centered classrooms are a vision for many educators and teacher educators. Many articles and reports describe a paradigm shift in how schools are structured and how children are taught. Some theorists believe that not only must we change the philosophies and strategies used by inservice teachers, but that novice teachers must be prepared with a "best practices" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993) approach to teaching. Unfortunately, one of the common comments made by student teachers is that the teachers with whom they work during their field work do not practice what the student has been taught on the college campus. The impact of the student teaching semester and the first year of teaching is well documented as helping to determine the strategies and philosophy of the novice. One possible way of increasing the strength of the campus experience and in addressing the conflict experienced by students when they encounter different philosophies in the field is to model learner centered approaches.

Many teacher educators believe they are modeling learner centered approaches if they use cooperative groups or have students actively doing something during the course. This may not be enough to prepare the novice to withstand the influences of other teachers when the novice acquires his or her first classroom. A much stronger experience is necessary to provide the background and structure for the student to understand how a learner centered classroom can work.

The Teacher Educator as The Diver

This paper describes how the authors moved toward an extreme position of learner centeredness and some of the changes that occur in

teacher education students in these classes. Two specific issues of teaching strategies and assessment techniques are examined. We use the metaphor of diving off a diving board to help describe process of change. Many times we felt as if we had stepped off the edge, and like the coyote in the cartoon, suddenly felt nothing beneath us for support. Unlike the coyote though, teacher educators have a strong foundation for using a constructivist approach with preservice teachers.

The Divers

As beginning teacher educators, the authors were committed to having college students understand and experience learning as it had occurred in our classrooms. Four years ago when we began, we were not only new to college classrooms, but new to each other. One author had experience in public and private schools and for several years was director of an early childhood program. The other author was an award winning clinical faculty member who had just completed her thirteenth year teaching third grade.

Climbing the ladder

The first semester we struggled to find or create ideas to actively involve the students and reduce lecture time. We felt strongly that we should model to the students the strategies we were teaching them. Slowly, a semi-center approach developed throughout the semester. After a brief lecture, the students would move through several learning stations in groups that reinforced the topic of the lecture. Then we would close with discussion and sometimes more lecture about what they had done in the centers. Some of the activities in the stations worked, others required too much time, or needed several sessions to fully develop the concepts we wanted students to learn. We were concerned that students

would miss some of the information necessary to the course if we did not discuss it ourselves. Another worry was that we couldn't depend upon students doing the necessary reading or making connections between the reading and the activities.

Dedicated to the idea of the student accepting responsibility for the learning and making choices about evidence of progress, students were required to develop a portfolio. At the end of the semester, the portfolios were very similar to one another and lacked the sincerity of goal setting and reflection. The portfolios consisted of activities in the class which gave them the appearance of a folder of projects and papers. We had not changed the assessment structure enough to help students see a difference in how they were assessed. The students followed the steps for a portfolio, but lost the essence of taking responsibility for what they learned. As teachers, we accepted the responsibility for the lack of depth in what students said in their self reflections. Goal setting with the students had occurred late in the semester, so students had not had the opportunity to make decisions about learning in areas they felt were important.

On the diving board

The second semester provided a fresh start, and an entirely new set of classes, but mostly the same group of students. One course was chosen to be organized so that students would have an experience in a whole language setting (Goodman, Hood, & Goodman, 1991). The course incorporated language arts and social studies, so the students could see how integrated curriculum could work. Since the group of students was essentially the same, they had experience working in groups and structured learning centers and developing portfolios. This time, the class was held in large blocks of time. We began with a group time and

mini-lesson. The writing process was introduced along with other tasks the students had to complete during the semester. After the mini-lesson each day of class, a work time allowed students to work on projects for the class. The conference approach was used for lesson planning, curriculum development activities, presentations, and other tasks as well as for original writing. Students were free to use open areas near the classroom and the computer lab. Many materials and the authors' personal libraries of education and children's books were also made available to the students during this time. Students conferenced with each other, with the instructor, and were free to consult with other teacher education faculty and on occasion with teachers at a nearby elementary school.

Still concerned that the content could not be explicitly discussed in the class, an alternative was devised. The instructor placed materials related to the day's mini-lesson topic in the classroom and locations students used for group meetings. These usually were done on a learning center board, but were only informational centers. No tasks were involved since students had received those as part of the syllabus and course assignments. Information was placed on the boards, handouts and other materials, samples and examples were set up as part of the display. Students were observed taking notes, discussing the information, and picking up handouts both during the class work time and outside of the class meeting times. They requested the information to be left for several days so they could access it between other classes. This seemed to be a very positive approach to having enough time to include breadth and depth of content.

After work time, the class met again for sharing. Sharing included Author's Chair, presentations about how to teach various elements of the language arts and social studies curriculum and other tasks like use of creative drama or assessment tool development. Many, but not all of these

presentations were done by the students and the instructor supplemented as necessary.

To help the development of the portfolio, at the beginning of the semester students were assisted in writing goals for the semester. Some were chosen from the course syllabus, others had to be personally developed goals about the course content. The idea of students' having unique experiences and knowledge meant some flexibility must be incorporated into the portfolio process.

As the semester unwound, students discovered various ways to meet their goals, so they had unique samples for evidence. Students were also able to develop ideas they had about how they could complete a task since most of the tasks were open-ended. They were required to present the idea to the instructor for approval. Most went away from such conferences with a look of surprise when their ideas were approved, although often with modifications to meet course requirements. There was a general attitude of surprise that they could determine how they learned. As they saw their ideas being accepted and applauded by the author and the class, the idea that they could be in charge of their learning began to be evident in their discussions. The instructor was surprised to learn that students were voluntarily meeting outside of class to develop projects, discuss professional literature, and do extra projects. Many students chose to do extra tasks because they wanted to improve their professional abilities. This was an improvement from the previous semester when credit was necessary to motivate them for a task.

At the end of the semester students wrote a statement of self-reflection for the portfolio about what they learned and what they still needed to know. When we held portfolio conferences, students had clear ideas about what they had learned. Most were very adamant that they knew they had much more to learn to be an effective teacher and that they

could see that there was another way to learn. The portfolios still had more evidence than necessary to show evidence toward a goal, but there was a great deal of diversity in how students organized and justified their choices of evidence and their reflective statements of learning. Students had also included items that were not required for points for a grade, indicating that perhaps they did the activity for the sake of learning, not a grade.

Inching along the diving board

The second year was spent polishing activities and devising more ways for students to become active in the classes. Since the authors taught the same classes as the year before, we were able to enhance the best activities, and improve those that worked but needed more polish. Activities that resulted in little learning were replaced. This year also allowed us to improve the portfolio process so that students were given more opportunities to make choices. More informational boards were created that students could access outside of class time. Handouts for them to include in their teaching files were developed to supplement the time for discussion in class.

A step to the end of the board

After the second year, the first author accepted a position at a university and redesigned some of the activities for the new assignment. The remainder of this paper describes her continued progress toward a learner centered classroom. The mentoring process continued via e-mail, fax and telephone. Sharing of ideas, handouts, and other resources remained important, but each of the authors were more confident that a learner centered approach was "best practice" (Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 1993) for preservice teachers.

The class previously described was a language arts/social studies class with mixed early childhood and elementary students. The new audience would only be early childhood students, and instead of social studies, fine arts was integrated with language arts. One advantage to the new position was a classroom designated as a model language arts classroom. It would be possible to provide many more materials and informational items in a print rich environment.

The first semester in the new setting was much like the first year. The whole language format was the structure for each class period, but each class meeting had a different set of learning stations set up for the day. One important difference was the author's goal to take anecdotal records and photographs during the semester. This had been a goal throughout the process, but had never been satisfactorily accomplished. This semester was the first step toward a few comprehensive notes about each student. Using many of the activities from earlier semesters meant that the activities were ready and better developed, which allowed the instructor to attend to other tasks.

Portfolios were more elaborate for first time portfolios than the first semester. Helping students set goals early in the semester with checkpoints along the way appears to help students better see what they have learned. These students are usually only have the author as instructor for one semester, so the development of the portfolio is short term. When the students have a second semester with a professor who supports the creation or enhancement of their portfolios they have a clearer idea of the portfolio process. Student comments reveal that they "know what it needs to show" at the beginning of their second semester of portfolio development. Experience is apparently very important to the development of a rich, informative portfolio.

The structure of how activities were graded was a step backward in

the portfolio development. By returning to the structured stations, the diversity and open-endedness of the tasks was reduced. Many of the activities were simply credit/no credit since there was no clear way to provide feedback to the student about the quality of the activity. The portfolios still had an appearance for many students of being a way to prove they did the work to get the points. They still were not willing to take a risk with the points for their grade instead of evaluating what they learned and justifying their position.

Off the edge of the diving board

The second semester was the brave leap off the edge of the diving board. The class was entirely restructured to have all the tasks presented in learning centers. Task cards were written for the centers with instructions and information about points. The classroom was organized so that students had access to many resources for individual tasks. Materials for the tasks were found in the centers or specific ideas were included for finding resources. The whole language format of a mini-lesson, work time, and sharing was retained, and portfolios were introduced early in the semester. Conferences for tasks as well as original writing were held and anecdotal records kept. The process was introduced on the first day after students had experienced several structured stations. Beginning the second class time, students were expected to make their own decisions about what tasks to do and what work they would accomplish during the work time.

This approach was too much, too fast. One student reported she went home and cried. The students had never had any kind of a similar experience in the classroom and they were still happy to sit back, take notes and do only what was needed to get the points.

Fortunately, as part of the modeling process, the author had always

involved the students in her reflections, a sort of pedagogical "think aloud" (Routman, 1991). The instructor was explicit on the first day of class about the goal of providing students with a model of a very different approach to teaching. As the semester progressed, through discussion of the problems we encountered, the students found solutions to many of the problems with the course. The students liked knowing that they were part of something different and that the instructor was willing to be a risk taker for their benefit. Improving the course became important to the students because they were experiencing reflective teaching.

One particular suggestion students made was to provide them with individual sets of the task cards. The task cards were only available in the classroom and many students borrowed them and made copies to take home and read and think about how they could do the task. The reflection that students experienced about their plans and progress toward goals was evident in their request for the tasks. One of the most positive things about the semester, reported by the same student who cried, was that there were truly cooperative groups working in this semester. She explained that they realized quickly that they had to work with other students to accomplish the tasks. She said they had been told about cooperative groups in classes, but that when they worked in groups problems occurred that made most of the students prefer to work alone. Many of the tasks are designed with that goal in mind, so that was a step forward.

The students' reflections in their portfolios were positive. They all appreciated having an opportunity to see how non-traditional learning environments could work. Students were extremely supportive that even though the first part of the semester was stressful and that the course was a lot of work, they were impressed that the instructor was doing what they had been told they should do in the classroom. For these

students, teacher educators lose much of their credibility when they do not "practice what they preach."

Reaching back for the diving board

Having stepped off so far into the unknown, it was time to find the right place to use for launching students as novice teachers who had a well developed philosophy they could feel confident about when they left the university. For the current semester the task cards were standardized to include information about readings, both in the text and in professional literature. There is also information about how the task will be evaluated and what products should be turned in for grading. Sharing was expanded to include a newsletter for written materials as well as special days for displaying materials made for tasks.

Students received a copy of the task cards and several charts that explained the structure of the class. These were explained early in the semester, but the amount of information is still overwhelms students at the beginning of the semester. A good balance appears to be to have the students work through structured centers for the first few weeks while mini lessons are focusing on specific content. Then after they have had time to see how to work in the centers and in groups, gradually turn the control of the work time and the choice of tasks over to the students. They need to adjust to the idea of being in control of their learning while someone else is still in control of what they do when they come to class.

Some students are still very reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning. This appears to vary with the personality of the group. This particular semester some students seem to be trying to find the easiest way out, while others are doing much more than is required because they know it will help them become a better teacher. The portfolio process has been adapted to provide the students with a list of

competencies. They choose several based upon what they need to know. Then they choose tasks to help them learn more about the competency and later to show evidence of their progress for the portfolio.

One tool to help with this is a self assessment from the text we use for the class (Jalongo, 1992). The self-assessment was copied so students could write on their copy and not have to write in their books. After students take the first part of the assessment on the first day of class, the author picks up the assessments and puts them away. Near the end of the semester when we discuss how to organize their portfolio, it is returned and they complete the second part of the assessment. This helps the students have a structure for thinking about the course content and to reflect upon what they have learned. Many of them include their copy in their portfolio and refer to it in the self-reflection. They discover that if they did not read the assigned readings on the task cards, they may have missed some important information. They also realize how much they have learned through the mini-lessons and the tasks they have done.

The Teacher Education Student as The Diver

The students go through some stages of development that the authors attempt to define.

Shock: The Water is Cold !

The first stage for students is a state of shock. Students are experiencing something very different from their fourteen or fifteen years of schooling has taught them (they are juniors and seniors). Some of this is necessary. They have heard the sales pitch before that a class will be active, and that usually means a group project. They must realize that this is really a different approach. The importance of needing to cooperate also seems to occur during this stage. As a teacher, it is

difficult to be comfortable with scaring the students, but perhaps we must be a little over dramatic to get education to change. Just the right balance may be a matter of trial and error until research shows a better way.

Overwhelmed: I don't want to dive!

Once the students are over their initial shock, they become overwhelmed by the amount of work they think is needed to show that they have made progress. They also realize that it is not just how many points they make, but how they can show that they learned. Students express concern that they cannot complete the work for the grade they want. They often make comments that they don't like this feeling, but that they like the class and the opportunity to make choices and decisions.

Busyness: Make it look like you know how to dive.

Students appear to realize that if they are going to meet their goals, they must get busy. They spend a lot of time discussing what tasks they will do and brainstorming ideas with their groups. During this time few tasks are completed, but planning is evident during work time. They begin to make comments that the course is different and that they are glad to experience it. They often begin to make comparisons to children and primary classrooms. Relationships among students are developed. Students comment that they get to know their peers more in this class than other classes and that they want to work together. If educators are to work as team members, this approach may help prepare preservice teachers as team members.

Accomplishment: Using the Springboard.

A little after mid-term students begin to turn in projects, to share,

and to conference with the instructor about their ideas how to accomplish tasks. At this point they prefer not to have long mini-lessons in favor of getting things accomplished during work time. At this stage, some of them realize they want to do extra tasks for the knowledge or experience. They begin to explain ideas for the future and express eagerness to get many things (lessons, materials, etc.) ready for their classrooms. They complete their activities and time in field classrooms where they must try many of the ideas and lessons they planned. Peer evaluation and evaluation of lessons by cooperating teachers help them realize they can teach. Many students show evidence of considerable progress in the teaching skills they use in field lessons.

Satisfaction: Smooth Entry into the Water

Attention in mini-lessons near the end of the semester is focused at the portfolio and providing support for how it can be developed. Some uncertainty is evident since students must decide how to organize the portfolio and make decisions about evidence. Most students recognize that the process is similar to deciding what tasks to do and that they have made decisions already that help to form the portfolio. Sometimes there is concern that the tasks they chose will not support the competencies they set as goals for themselves. Thinking becomes broader as they realize how a task may fit many competencies and that a competency has many ways to be accomplished. Students begin to feel that they will be successful and they were responsible for their own success.

Reflection: Surfacing From the Depths

Most students reflect and express thoughts that indicate they are surprised at how much they accomplished. They describe how they learned much more than in other classes. They also outline areas for future

development and some of the things they want to do to continue their professional development. They leave the class excited about ideas for their own classrooms and filled with possibilities for lessons, materials, organizing their environments, and the growth of the children they will teach. Many of the students describe in their portfolio how they use the strategies and techniques learned in course in their Sunday school classes, in their part time jobs at child care centers, and with their own children. Self-reflections demonstrate how they see the multiple connections for language and literacy in many situations. They have used the class as a springboard for other experiences and their personal educational philosophies (Rathbone, 1995).

Conclusion

These stages are still becoming evident in the author's classes. As the course described progresses toward a ideal balance of tradition and learner centered teacher education for the student, it is evident that it does have an impact on student beliefs and philosophy. A future task for will be to determine long term benefits for the students as they begin their teaching careers when they have experienced learner centered teacher education.

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